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AUTHOR Nienhaus, Brian
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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how economic developments in the United States communication industry have altered the scope and meaning of two central sociological concepts, the commodity form and charisma. The first section describes the economic structure of the public sphere in a theory of commodity relations. This theory is then used to review, in the second section, the Weberian concept of charisma, with examples drawn primarily from previously conducted research into the reformation of the public sphere during the years of the New Deal. The second section deals with charisma in first-order commodity relations, charisma in second-order commodity relations, and charisma in non-commodified relations. Twenty-three notes are included. (SR)

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Communication, The Commodity Form and Charisma

Paper Presented at the
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Qualitative Studies Division

Brian Nienhaus
Doctoral Candidate, Department of Communication
The University of Michigan
1012a Frieze Building
Ann Arbor, MI 48109
Telephone: (313) 764-8290

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I. Introduction

In this essay I explore how economic developments in the U.S. communication industry have altered the scope and meaning of two central sociological concepts, the commodity form and charisma. The first section describes the economic structure of our public sphere in a theory of commodity relations. This theory is then used to review the Weberian concept of charisma, with examples drawn primarily from my ongoing research into the reformation of our public sphere during the years of the New Deal.

I feel it necessary to say something at the outset about the tone of this paper. Despite my training as a social scientist, I remain biased toward the concrete in thought and expression. This bias is, of course, related to an aesthetic of realism, an interest in people in the flesh as opposed to abstract categories like 'socioeconomic status,' a belief in essentials beyond the postmodern cavalcade of appearances, a desire for what scientists call 'parsimony,' in short, for clear and simple ideas with which to understand the world.

Despite this bias, the paper remains uncomfortably abstract at times. Yet I feel only partially responsible for this. History bestows upon us an active legacy of real abstractions, of real but ultimately ficticious entities with which one must deal if one is to function effectively in this world. These abstractions exist without any assistance from pedantic scholars, and they wreak some havoc on anyone's attempts to look at the world and describe it simply.

Imagine, for example, an ethnographer watching a subject watch Tom Brokaw on an NBC news program. She may describe this technologically mediated encounter with the utmost care for concrete detail, and with inspired balance between scholarly detachment and empathic participation she may render the subject's meaning-making activities perfectly. Everything vivid, everything concrete.

Mr. Brokaw, however, works for NBC, a private corporation. We do not have to add the label 'complex organization' to NBC to begin to perceive the process of real world abstraction at work. Mr. Brokaw's image appears before the ethnographer and her subject, but he most likely speaks an unseen other's words, narrates another's edited visuals, and generally acts in concert with others' unseen but very real interests.

One may perform an ethnography for various reasons, but if one of them is to ground one's work in the real or the concrete, or on the observable, the overall object slips away. The ethnographer misses the parallel reality of corporate symbolic production. If we move to study the latter, then the viewer's reality slips away.

For one who desires clarity or parsimony, to observe mass communicative phenomena is to make a series of deep cuts with Occam's razor that no abstractly-labeled ideogram of boxes and arrows can sufficiently overcome. How do we characterize in words the reality of a corporate projection such as Tom Brokaw, or of its simultaneous reception by millions across the vast physical expanse of the United States?

Underlying this paper is a desire to discover simple terms with which to understand a number of the very complex phenomena already out there in our mass-mediated society. It is my belief that the theory of commodity relations is a step in this direction. It can provide a comprehensive picture of the economic structure of our public sphere and concrete insights into such mercurial phenomena as mass-mediated charismatic movements. But the insights may only be as concrete, or as simple, as the legacy of advanced capitalism will allow us at present.

I. Commodity Relations[1]

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[1]Certain parts of the argument in this section have received fuller development in two other papers. For an application of the commodity form to a critique of social-scientific measurements of mass media exposure, see my 1987 paper "Commodity Relations: A Theoretical Approach to the Mass Communication Process," presented at the annual conference of the International Communication Association, Montreal, Quebec. For

Classical economists like to count and measure things. They want the objects of their interest to stand still so their measurements will be easier and more accurate. To reflect this interest they label their economic phenomena 'goods.' Political economists are interested in things, too, but they are also—even fundamentally—interested in the relations between things. They express this desire by naming their fundamental economic category the 'commodity,' because they believe it useful to study economic phenomena as if they were things that stand for the relationship between a self and an other. The commodity is then an objectified relation, a thing attached to other things, and is thus is a constant reminder to the political economist of some fundamental limitations inherent in any process of knowledge formation erected upon the basis of immediate observation.

Consider the average tomato offered for sale in a supermarket. Sitting there amongst the fake parsley, it may be evaluated for color, shine, presence of blemishes, and to a lesser degree, to see if its texture is such that it will be more like chopped hockey puck than chopped vegetable in our salad.

What don't we see? Among other things absent from our vision are the heroic efforts of generations of engineers and biogeneticists to design steel-toothed tomato pickers, conveyor belts, gas chambers and a tomato which would survive them all unsquashed. Before the current efforts of the ecology movement we were generally unaware of the pesticides, herbicides, and preservatives used in tomato production; before Cesar Chavez, we did not see the life-situation of the tenders of the tomato fields.

Part of the price we pay for living in a society with a complex division of labor is that we do not see the broader social reality behind the products we purchase. If we remember that these things are commodities, however, we are reminded that we *could*

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a critique of the concept of the commodity form from Marx through Lukacs, the Frankfort school, Habermas and the modern cultural studies movement, see my "Beyond Medium and Text: Commodity Relations," a paper presented at the Center for Twentieth Century Studies International Conference on Television, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, April, 1988.

know much more about what we observe if we gave up our fixation on their immediate location in physical space and historical time. We could observe them at earlier or later stages in a production/consumption process and pick up a considerable degree of understanding along the way. We could operate on the problem of the unseen versus the seen for a long time before we would have to take metaphysical refuge in subliminal meaning, cognitive structure, or God.

As many know, commodities are not only things that stand for a relationship between a self (say a producer) and an other (consumer), but they are also exchanged for money in markets that tend toward concentration over time. Critics of capitalism have come to take a dim view of the commodification process in general. One, it truncates one's vision of the social, and two, if we consider labor to be the commodification of human activity, it dehumanizes people by subjecting their independence and creativity to the technical organization of the workplace and the unseen and sometimes tragic vagaries of the market. As western Marxists like Theodor Adorno began to take notice of our culture industry, it is perhaps understandable that they would look at our popular cultural artifacts and call them 'commodities' with the illocutionary intent of performing a insult.[2]

More often than not, the objects of western Marxist scorn were supported by advertising, which means that more often than not they were wrong. At the time of its broadcast, the *Amos 'n Andy* radio program was not a commodity. It was not being sold to its listeners for money. Yet it was part of a business—the business of commercial broadcasting. In this line of work, a program is only a commodity when it is bought from a production firm by a broadcast firm. After its purchase it becomes part of a commodification process that I believe exists in no sphere of human activity except mass communication: It is used to grab the attention of lots of listeners or viewers. Their

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[2]Adorno, Theodor and Max Horkheimer (1979) "The Culture Industry: Enlightment as Mass Deception," in James Curran and Janet Woolacott, eds. *Mass Communication and Society*, Beverly Hills: Sage.

aggregated time and attention is measured as best a ratings firm can (there still is considerable measurement error, evidently), packaged in mass or target-market fashion, and sold for real money to the agents of consumer goods firms. There are enough real abstractions in this process to make the most verbally-oriented among us quiver with delight.

Yet the audience commodity is a simple idea, and it was clearly outlined by Smythe over ten years ago.[3] However, Smythe also suggested that further work on the audience commodity should ask what functions it served for capital, and, noting that it was the latest wrinkle in the historical march of commodification, he further suggested that we study the audience commodity specifically because it would come to take over and structure our entire communication industry.

Smythe has outlined a rather straightforward Marxist program of research based on the discovery of the audience commodity, but I do not believe it could be carried out as he outlined it.

In the first place, Marxists do not quite have their commodification house in order for the domain of human symbolic activity. Symbolic products and actions were being marketed for a long time before Marx—who also made his living as a journalist and writer—wrote his critique of commodity fetishism[4]. The direct sale of symbolic products and services had not been subjected to anything near the scrutiny received by the sale of material objects or labor power. When one reads a book there are certainly things about its production—say the fact that it might have been word-processed by someone other than the author for something over mimimum wage—that go unseen. Still, symbolic products

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[3]Smythe, Dallas (1977) "Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism," *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* 1:3 (Fall):1–27. See also Murdock, Graham (1978) "Blindspots about Western Marxism: A Reply to Dallas Smythe," *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* 2:2 (Spring-Summer):109–119, and Smythe's rejoinder in ibid., pp. 120–129.

[4]Marx, Karl (1967) *Capital, Vol. 1*. New York: International Publishers, pp. 71–83.

convey and sell meaning itself. Unseen historical processes may themselves be captured and conveyed in historical narrative. Through symbols one's subjective vision is externalized and offered to an other. The other, through the act of purchase, indicates that she hopes to find something useful in the producer's work, and unless she is making a fetish of its leather binding, she will find her useful substance in the meaning of the symbols themselves. Compared to objects like supermarket tomatoes, how extensive can the mystification process be for symbolic objects and services that are offered for sale?

The direct commodification of symbolic products and services seems to me to stand for comparatively open and benign relations between a self and another. I have called them *first-order commodity relations* to distinguish them from the commodification process analyzed by Smythe. Herein lies the second reason a straightforward extension of the Marxian critique of commodification won't do for the symbolic sphere: There are actually two distinct commodification processes unfolding in separate directions. We cannot therefore speak of *the* commodification process. To keep the distinction clear, I have labeled the process by which symbol streams financed by advertising are presented to the public *second-order commodity relations*.

Second-order commodity relations present an entirely new problem for political economists. Here, people's presence in the exchange relation is vital, but *not* as buyers or sellers. It is a commodity more peculiar than wage labor. While wage laborers 'voluntarily' sell their human capacities to another, in second-order relations audiences are not asked to even 'voluntarily' sell their attention to the advertiser; indeed, they are generally unaware that it is being sold at all.

This peculiar process dominates our public sphere. We could call our mass media a system of second-order commodity relations and not err egregiously in our claim. Until cable, our television and radio were almost pure examples of second-order relations, and as popular newspapers and periodicals come to receive 80 to 100 percent of their support through advertising, they can be expected to resemble the broadcast media. If

USA TODAY fails as a newspaper (or succeeds as a TV program), it will be because it charges a relatively high price while using layout and narrative forms designed for people accustomed to witnessing news in second-order relations, where they do not pay.

It is easier to see pathological consequences for symbolic exchange in second-order relations. To mention the most obvious first, consumer goods firms and their agents can censor the symbol stream. Since they are paying they can expect the stream to conform as broadly as possible to their purposes. Too, some of our notions of what constitutes a healthy narrative form are sundered by the exigencies of grabbing and peaking audience attention at four-minute intervals.

What troubles me most, however, is that in second-order relations audience members have chronic difficulty validating the importance of the symbol stream presented to them. Since they are not afforded the opportunity to pay, they do not have the chance to apply much motivating force to their feedback messages to media firms. They may write letters, but the firms must evaluate this feedback for both its representativeness *viz a viz* the targeted audience and its acceptability to program sponsors. Market surveys may provide additional feedback, but here again the interaction is structured not by voluntary acts by the audience but by the industry's agenda and desires. From the practical logic of second-order relations, it is difficult for me to see a place for energetic involvement by audience members in the determination of what they will see. It is a symbolic realm seemingly designed for relaxation and a passive gaze. Direct sales here would be an intrusion; it is a marketplace only in the eyes of the most abstract thinker. To believe that second-order symbol streams reflect what the people want is to ignore the very real difficulties this relation sets up between the producing organization and the audiences it must create.

Our media system is primarly supported by advertising, but to suggest, as Smythe did, that it would come to dominate our symbolic realm is to overstate the case. A residual of non-commodified symbolic activity will probably always remain in everyday

life, and presidents will probably continue to be able to have habitual and free access to the public through the media. But the real problem for Smythe is that he overlooks the sphere of first-order relations entirely. In particular, he overlooks us. While the bulk of symbolic activity for pay may take place outside of the mass media, it is certainly significant in understanding our public sphere as a whole. It will probably even grow in importance rather than be gobbled up by advertising.

What we will more likely observe is an increasingly clear split in our symbol system. On one side of this divide will be texts and services produced for sale by and for professionals and intellectuals—first-order commodities in first-order relations for first-order people. They will come to constitute the new middle class in advanced capitalism, or if you prefer, our information economy. On the other side of the fissure will flow that stream of programs that no one gets to pay for. There you will find people whose creative or intellectual efforts are not valued in the economy, people with routine clerical or manual jobs—the new working class.

I call these classes 'new' because they are defined by their place in this newly elaborated symbolic realm. I do not wish to pursue the subject of class at length, but I would like to give two examples from our own academic realm to suggest that this class structure is real.

Consider first the example of a scholar who goes home, tapes the *Bill Cosby Show*, reviews it and uses it for lecture or for publication. She has actually crossed a class divide. The program itself was not intended for such sustained productive activity. Let's say the scholar had written a paper on the program, and had an office staff person word process it. Both the staff person and the scholar are information workers. Why say they are in different social classes? We must move to the realm of leisure for our answer. Conceivably, the office worker, too, could go home, tape the show and write an article about it. It would not make sense to do so, however, as he has no ready outlet for his effort. Over time it will make more sense for him to go home and just relax. In a sense,

people like this are working class because their time at work and at leisure are clearly distinguished, and what they do symbolically during leisure time means little in the public sphere. This lesson has also been learned by media firms over the years, and they have come to design their news and entertainment offerings for people who will not make consequential use of the flow.

Until recently scholars looked at second-order symbol streams with disdain. Some of us, recognizing our freedom of choice over when we are at work, when at play, or when in their stimulating combination, have found that we can override the low-involvement ambience of second-order relations because we can work our time with TV programs into professionally useful commodities. Indeed this choice, this move toward popular culture, is seen by a number of us as having a number of positive consequences.

When we use television programs to teach our students we have also crossed a class divide. Adolescence is a social construct that disempowers young people. They do not have much opportunity to apply themselves in the socially acceptable institutions of the economy or the polity. It should come as no surprise, then, that children—even of the middle class—spend a lot of their time relaxing or socializing in the presence of second-order symbolic streams, which tend not to engage them in sustained fashion or habituate them to hard symbolic work. Postman laments what he has called a culture of amusement and the fact that students can't read or write. He sees the medium of television as the problem.[5] I suggest the problem is in the logic of second-order commodity relations, and while I agree that students do not read very well when they reach the university, I find that they can learn pretty quickly. All you have to do is teach them television. For the move toward the study of popular culture is a means by which we can interest students in our subject matter and motivate them to read and write. In a sense, we use television

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[5]Postman, Neil (1985) *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, New York: Viking Penguin.

studies today in the academy to give students the minimal skills they will need to avoid a second-order future.

If we imagine the public sphere as a whole, I suggest we can begin to unpack its mysteries by dividing it into three realms—of noncommodified relations (rare), first-order relations (our social location), and second-order relations (the television world of students and secretaries). From there we can see social divisions and some of the modern contours of our class structure. But if the discussion continues in this ostensibly Marxist direction for long it will provide dimishing returns. The U.S. is a stable and comparatively wealthy society; it is not in the throes of a deep social crisis where entire classes are mobilized to concerted action. To push this even symbolically-structured definition of social class to the realm of class conflict beyond the classroom would be to tell a story of action without actors. In our culture, most people still think and act as if they were individuals. When they are socially mobilized at all, it is usually in mild form around some human embodiment of hope—around a charismatic personality. The final section of this paper takes the theory of commodity relations sketched out here to rework the Weberian notion of charisma.

Charisma and Commodity Relations

What follows will not be in the form of a critical explication of the concept of charisma, where the results of a literature review are presented, tabulated and summarized. Instead I will introduce the Weberian concept and its problems in summary strokes, and fill out categorical details (e.g. of how a movement can fail) in the sections that rework the concept from the perspective of commodity relations.

When charisma received its first systematic explication at the hands of Max Weber, its domain was clearly beyond the realm of the everyday.[6] While the 'everyday' could mean a number of things ranging from tradition and custom in premodern society to the bureaucratic order of modernity, movements could always arise around a people's recognition of the special gift of a leader. Weber, who elsewhere used the metaphor of an iron cage to characterize the feel of life as it became increasingly ordered by instrumental reason, took up the concept of charisma to show how order could never be completely secured.[7] A charismatic process could arise in any social formation, disrupt the pattern of its practices and lead to social change. It is a conceptual antidote—albeit a dangerous one—to visions of creeping bureaucracy, so to speak of the charisma was, at one time, to signal discussion of an important, even revolutionary event.

It is worth noting that charisma is no longer used only by specialists. It is frequently found in popular discourse and, as one scholar has pointed out, is the brand name of a perfume.[8] It is now used to describe all sorts of people and things *within* the ordered realm of the everyday. This presents problems for attempts to rein the concept back in to something like its original domain of powerful, potentially change-inducing events. The diffusion of its application may be due to linguistic laziness. If so, then efforts to limit its conceptual domain are appropriate. But today's broad usage of the term is a social fact, too. The sociologist Edward Shils recognized the expansiveness in the set of referents to charisma in popular discourse, and attempted to rework the concept accordingly.[9] In doing so he came to equate it with the notion of status. Shils' definition

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[6](1968) *Economy and Society*, Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, eds. New York: Bedminster Press.

[7](1958) *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. New York: Scribners.

[8]Bensman Joseph and Michael Givant (1975) "Charisma and Modernity: The Use and Abuse of a Concept," *Social Research* 42:3 (Autumn):571-614.

[9](1965) "Charisma, Order, and Status," *American Sociological Review*:30 (April):201-215.

was accepted for a while—he wrote the article on charisma for the *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*—but later scholars noted, correctly, I believe, that taken to its logical extreme his definition of charisma undermined its utility by making it applicable to everything.[10]

Is charisma a hard thing binding a demagogic leader to irrationally fervent followers, or is it an ethereal social substance, perhaps finite in magnitude, whose density has been dispersed across a multitude of personalities and things? This is one question a reworking of the concept should address.

I said above that Weber's explication was reasonably detailed. He generally treats charisma not as a special characteristic of an individual, but as a relational and a cyclical concept. It is relational because Weber emphasized that it is the belief of the followers that give rise to the charismatic person. It is cyclical because, like any process, it has its ascendent phase, its active period, and its end. In addition, at Weber's hand the concept retained a this-worldly character: economic factors play a central yet problematic role in the ongoing charismatic movement.

Yet the concept Weber gave us was frustratingly incomplete. His economics are objectifying—we are told, basically, that the leader disdains business activity but must get resources for the movement, or that the leader must be seen by his followers as delivering the goods. Goods, resources, and money are ideas with a classical hue, from an economics that counts amounts of things rather than exploring the relations for which they stand.

Although Weber does recognize something of charisma's relational character he hesitates to treat it as a fundamentally communicative phenomenon, subject to the catalytic and constraining forces of the particular communicative environment in which it occurs. For example, Weber implies that the charismatic leader gives voice to the values and fears of his followers. Yet his theory does not address how a leader would come to know these very things. This gap may not be a problem for the study of small

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[10]Bensman, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 581–5.

communities in face-to-face relations with the leader. There we can assume that the leader learned the substance of his message by sharing the same physical space and experience of his followers. But what about a charismatic leader of a movement of millions? How does such a person come to objectify and voice the hopes of so many?

My intention in what follows is to define the charismatic process for our version of advanced capitalism. I will suggest that there are three ideal types which correspond, in order of presentation below, to first-order commodity relations, second-order relations, and non-commodified relations. Each of these is an economic category, but their importance to this discussion is that each structures the the symbolic relations between leaders and the led in distinct ways. More importantly, the way in which a leader learns about and acts on the fears and desires of his followers differs systematically across these three relations.

A. Charisma in First-Order Commodity Relations

We usually find people like ourselves operating in that sphere where symbolic products are produced for money. Academics, professionals, administrators and even bohemian intellectuals probably overrepresent the general population in the first-order sphere. We are comfortable in its ambience. Even our internal conflicts—like those between academics and administrators, or between qualitative folks and number crunchers—are contained by some deep-seated sense that we are all in the same game. We are the institutionally legitimate intellectual craftspeople of our culture. We are also among the first to recognize a pretender in our midst.

To deal only with examples of national scope, Father Charles E. Coughlin, 1930's radio preacher, was one interloper. Today we can add a handful more from the practice of television evangelism. Our scorn for such people often manifests itself casually today, as we listen to or relate accounts of how they get in front of a microphone or

camera, say the most ridiculously melodramatic things, and then sit back and wait for all the donations to pour in. I am overdrawing the picture but not by much; there is a lot of disdain amongst us for such people, and there is a logic to it.

Through our crafted ideas, our policy papers, our authoritative sound-bites, and our paid-for time with the nation's adolescents, we hope to exercise influence over future social action. These other people are our competitors for influence. Like us they are paid for their thoughts and directives, but unlike us they are not paid through institutionally legitimate channels. They draw their funds, as it were, from below—from the individual contributions of the unseen masses. They are, like us, operators in the symbolic realm. But they do not arrive there on the basis of academic credentials or acquired professional standards. They are pushed into our space by what appear to us to be irrational forces.

To us the financial underpinnings of their rise seem so on the surface that we cannot quite see beyond what we call their irrational character. We see them gesticulate, plead, cry, give their mailing addresses and receive money, and wonder at the the cognitive state of the masses. We call them demagogues, note that they should be monitored, and if any energy is left, we classify the historical cases by the rhetorical tools they use.

I have concurrently introduced the first-order charismatic with a stereotype of academic disdain for them because I believe there is a structural inducement in our closeness to them that compels us to cut short their objective consideration. How do these people rise? What gives them their vision? How do they fail? After reading a number of contemporary and scholarly accounts of first-order charismatics, one may be struck by the level of cynicism—especially at the motivation of these leaders—, and by how the aura of disdain grinds narrative inquiry to a halt before these basic questions are addressed.

The first-order charismatic is indeed selling hopes and dreams for money. Today he uses the mass media, and reaches numbers far beyond the wildest possibities of the wandering prophet. But the use of the mass media is not an unmixed aid.

The ability to reach millions only exacerbates the problem of what they will say when get on the air.

Problematic as this may seem, the first-order charismatic is often able to merge the subjectivity of thousands of different personalities with amazingly concrete language. Those that manage to do this possess a knowledge that excites the passions and envy of today's survey researcher: To speak to and actually reach a mass of people means that the speaker actually knows some basic things about their subjective state. Whence this special knowledge?

Any number of people could have a variety of direct life experiences that could start a charismatic movement. I would argue, however, that once on the air their experiences are not enough, and they must figure out the logic of this first-order relationship if they are to proceed. A part of this logic is, of course, that working-class people will be paying them directly for their message. The other part is that the same working class will be the source of modification to their subsequent messages. Along with the voluntary contributions come letters, cards, telegrams and phone calls, a good number of them dicated from the heart, containing messages of hope and sorrow that not only provide the first-order charismatic with a valid agenda for future sermons, but also an idea of their emotional intensity and their naturally occurring linguistic form. Weber noted that followers validated something in the charismatic leader's message. At this point in his theory he reified the validation process in the leader's personality more often than not, and thus did not entertain the possibility that what the followers were validating were their own thoughts and concerns, articulated with grace by the leader.[11]

It seems that only a few people have deigned to enter into a direct financial relationship with the working class public, and fewer still have figured out the possibilities of its core dynamic. At this point the dynamic is in the form of a communication system with a feedback loop. The leader receives and internalizes symbolic offerings from the

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[11]*Economy and Society*, p. 241.

masses. He reshapes this material and adds to it, and gives it back to them during his broadcasts. He may be motivated to do so because his audience pays him directly; he may also have more altruistic motivations. Critics of modern television evangelists often point to their material greed, but as we move on to discuss how charismatic movements fail we will see that there are more serious consequences when a dying movement's leaders motives are most pure.

Weber observes a number of events that will cause a charismatic movement to break down. One, the movement could be small and easily suppressed by groups on the outside. It could also fail internally, where the leader is seen to lose his grace. I would give a particular extension to this argument in the case of the first-order charismatic. He gains considerable power from his following, and may wish to use it to lobby legitimate institutions for change. Father Coughlin formed the National Union for Social Justice in the 1930's, and Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority was more than a cliché.[12] But if the charismatic leader moves into the institutional sphere his attention is now at least split between the world image he receives in his letters and the one he must handle in Washington. The leader could acclimate himself to palace privilege, and his followers could begin to notice a distance creeping into the relationship and begin to fall away.

Weber also mentions failure by success—where a leader's visions are accepted, put into practice, and ultimately become routine. I hesitate to apply this example of 'failure' here because I do not see a clear historical example of it within a first-order movement. I do, however, see a way in which first-order movements fail that is directly related to their mode of finance. I call it failure by acceleration.

Partly due to distractions from political activities, and partly due to the tendency to measure popular impact in money and not in systematic surveys, the first-order charismatic can easily run into trouble by overestimating his numerical base. As his

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[12]The most complete account of Father Coughlin's political activities is still Tull, Charles (1965) *Father Coughlin and the New Deal.* Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.

movement proceeds he has to pay for airtime, hire clerks to handle the phones and process the mail, and create an executive staff to provide direction to the organization. This all raises fixed expenses and makes the natural variability of weekly donations a source of concern. He takes steps to regularize the financial flow, often creating magazines for sale by subscription. But the bulk of his income generally continues to come in by contribution, and he may panic at the problem of meeting his payroll.

If he is sincere in his calling, the problem only gets worse. A sincere leader pays close attention to the message coming to him from below. He may strongly empathize with their situation and work fervently for its betterment. In doing this work he knows he is fighting the good fight. Insofar as he perceives failure—and payroll pressures could well force him to entertain the notion—he may redouble his efforts. Part of this exertion may take the form of more strident rhetoric and gesticulation. This could alienate fringe followers and reduce his financial base even further. At the same time those who remain now identify with the more fervently enacted imagery—they may well be among those who are suffering most from extant social conditions, and their letters to the leader will have a more focused and sharp tone of despair. This is the process of failure by acceleration. At its very end we may witness the naming of outgroups as absolute embodiments of absolute evil. Those within the movement—leaders and led—are completely enveloped in the struggle for for change, but their efforts come to nothing. The movement itself is labeled dangerous—indeed it is so even though by now it is also numerically small. Institutional action is often taken to put the remains of the movement to rest. Father Coughlin was ordered off the airwaves by his church in 1940, four years after the movement had begun to lose its numerical strength, and two years after he had entered into a rhetoric of anti-Semitism.[13]

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[13]There are no published accounts of money order income or number of letters delivered through the Royal Oak Michigan post office to Father Coughlin's operations at the Shrine of the Little Flower to cover his ascendent years of 1930 to 1934. One may piece together his more concerted efforts to come up with a more predictable income stream during and after the 1936 election from a number of secondary accounts. A wire

The latter stages of a first-order movement can be dramatic, and this affords institutions with chances to bring it to a halt. In the 1930's the major radio networks banned the sale of airtime to individuals for merely communicative purposes outside legitimate political campaigns.[14] The ban was undermined shortly after its inception by the birth of television. TV took advertising revenue from radio, and to make up for the loss local radio stations began to sell airtime to individuals—usually Protestant evangelicals.[15] And on radio they remained until the current disruption of the oligopoly of network television created time slots for sale to individuals on cable and independent television stations. Because of this change in the economic structure of the television industry, there is once again potential for national charismatic movements *a la* Father Coughlin to emerge.

In offering this sketch of the charismatic process under first-order commodity relations, where the bond between leader and led may be expected to become dangerously strong, I am not advocating renewed steps to prevent the sale of airtime to individuals. Indeed it seems to me more in the democratic spirit that the process of acceleration be checked not by fiat but by the presence of many first-order charismatics in our public sphere. Television evangelists demonstrate that the space is certainly there. At present they are the only ones who see that it is a good position from which to validate and direct the life experiences of otherwise unreachable people. I am not so sure that their communicative goals are that much different from ours—perhaps it is our idea that

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service report of testimony by an ex-employee of Coughlin published in the March 27, 1942 *New York Times* shows that his organization's income dropped off drastically after 1937. For an account of his recourse to anti-Semitic rhetoric, see Father Coughlin's own book (1939) *Am I an Anti-Semite?* Detroit: The Condon Printing Company. It reads uncomfortably.

[14]Schultze, Quentin (1988) "Evangelical Radio and the Rise of the Electronic Church, 1922-1948," *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 32:3 (Summer):289-306, p. 299.

[15]*Ibid.*, p. 301.

knowledge be divorced from passion, or that 'education' flows in one direction during its performance—that keeps people outside the religious calling from exploring its possibilities.

It may also be that we are more attuned to the overall structure of our symbolic sphere and are consequently not aware of the first-order charismatic process. It is a relatively small part of our mass-mediated activity, where the advertising world of second-order relations is hegemonic.

Charisma in Second-Order Commodity Relations

The world of second-order relations is the world of soap operas, network news, sitcoms, detective dramas, sports and gameshows. It drives the visual tendency in our print and the plethora of formats on our radio. If we assume information to be symbolic activity worth paying for, then second-order relations blurs the distinction between information and entertainment by stripping its symbol stream of useful information. Still, it must offer something to its second-order audience, I will call that something 'charisma.'

Yet what we normally understand as charisma is anathema to this industry. If one of its employees begins to become the embodiment of audience concerns and hopes, then the employee gains power against the firm. Barnouw recounts how early radio stations made their announcers identify themselves by number rather than by name.[16] Though the practice did not remain in force—people wanted to and could find out the names of those voices addressing them in their living rooms—history shows their business concerns to have been correct. An anchor or a star with 'draw' can command huge fees and salaries.

How do anchors and stars create such draw in second-order relations? In the first instance, we cannot overlook the luck of a straightforward trial-and-error process. There is a daily symbolic space to be filled, and the industry attracts all sorts of

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[16](1966) *A Tower in Babel.* New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 163-5.

talent to itself to fill it—where else is there financial support for the creative and the ambitious but in the second-order oligopoly? It hires our brilliant and our passionate people; they offer their own reworking of their sense of the popular in the second-order time slots. Many faces come and go. Many brilliant or touching moments are witnessed by the public, but such moments of recognition and identification are distributed across a sea of faces. Beyond the memories they bring, many aspirants to star status never get a chance to address the question of what millions might want—they are gone too soon.

The industry relies on the personal spark of numerous talents; were that enough then we would have an answer to our original question—no one would have time to find out and address the will of the masses. But the industry has found out that it needs enduring stars, and thus the door to a charismatic movement is left cracked open, although its containment within acceptable bounds is only wrought by continual monitoring and ad hoc action.

Stars, for example, get mail and could conceivably internalize the message from below and feed it back. Some of them actually do so, especially in the genre of standup comedy. Most often, however, the industry breaks up the feedback loop. The entertainer delivers lines written, rewritten, directed, and censored by others within and around the firm. After this process the star's space for operation may literally become a box around his body and 'personality'—his way of speaking, of gesturing, of emoting within a third party's narrative structure.

Network anchors are possibly in the best position to initiate a charismatic movement; they are also among the most socialized to a set of standards of newsworthiness and objectivity in the delivery of news. As professional journalists they believe that the symbols they give should be disembodied from their persons. They usually do not write their words. But as entertainers they know they should offer something more. They are left to innovate in their manner. If they 'are' something that works, they will continue to broadcast. And if they continue to broadcast they will acquire a special kind of

aura that stands out all the more because it unfolds against the kaleidescopic backdrop of second-order relations. They will become familiar faces.

A parade of magic moments, of microphones in the faces of relatives of tragic victims, a cult of mannerism, a familiar evening face. This is where charisma may be found in second-order relations. If there is passion in this on the audience side it is constantly diffused, subdued, or broken off. Over time, the one stable entity that may gain in magical character is the network itself, in a variation of what Weber called the charisma of office.

Shils' theory of the diffusion of charisma came wrapped in the language of abstract functionalism. As that mode of discourse came under attack, so did the idea of charisma as status within a stable social system. I believe, however, that the notion deserves a second look, and the above sketch is offered to suggest how we might validate strands of his argument. But there is more.

Despite its problems with personal embodiment processes, the industry does exhibit a kind of passion around the task of charismatizing things. To the extent that advertisers succeed in their efforts, their clients will value the audience attention that they purchase. Agencies and network marketing departments work together to construct a feedback loop moving from daily life to organization and back to daily life. Ethnographies and surveys gather information about people's needs, passions, and their expressive forms. Then the real passionate work of the industry begins. How to transfer this knowledge to a purchasable, consumable thing? How to make it special, charismatic? There are standard answers, e.g., the use of a star to promote a product. More creative efforts place the product in a mini-narrative of human action, where the status of actor's roles may be transfered. They also anthropomorphize products and let them feed back their own charms 'themselves.' Most experimentally, minimalist ads express the postmodern literary training of creative ad people and seem to say that a product is everything and nothing—and consumable on impulse at any time or place.

There is enough energy and excitement on the production side to entertain the question of charisma, but does it work? What about the public? Let me trace out a global response. We are a peculiar culture, especially in the degree of our physical mobility. We grow up in one place, go to school in another, and work in still others. Our urban spaces contain an uncomfortable degree of danger in our eyes; our suburbs are detached single-family homes. We know a few people very well, but every day in passing cars, on sidewalks, and in shopping malls we see a parade of strangers. I am not recreating a mass society critique here—we have already adapted to the parade. We find the passionate transference work of the creative ad agents useful. We rely on their efforts in our daily need to read passing strangers by their possessions and their consumption habits. We are Goffmanesque about ourselves, too. We wear and consume according to the personality we wish to be. To a large degree the passion of creative advertising has worked. There is charisma in perfume, in new cars, in soft drinks, and in our breakfast cereal. Our symbolic sphere is an embarrassment of riches.

The sociology of charisma arose from the anthropology and sociology of religion. Part of the original concern of this field was to understand the possibly fetishistic valuation of sacred objects, of objects that seemed to convey more meaning to those within the culture than was apparent through observation from without.[17] Here, if we follow the process of second-order relations we may observe and understand the way in which objects may be given status meanings beyond their nominal function. We can even understand why the extra meanings may be accepted by people. We run into trouble only when we remember that these little processes take place within a world-reaching formation of social relations of unfathomable complexity. The gap between what we can know in our immediate readings of objects and personalities, and the reality of globally-connected

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[17]Durkheim, Emile (1947) *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press.

human interaction, suggests that beyond first- and second-order charismatic processes there incubates a space for new earthly gods.

B. Charisma in Non-Commodified Relations

Today a relatively large number of people manage to get publicity on Warhol's fifteen-minute terms. Others, labeled 'experts,' are put onto the spotlight whenever an authoritative frame seems appropriate for a story. Politicians, too, can expect some amount of time in public view. Some of that time is paid for in campaigns, and some of it given in deference to their office or expertise. The one social position that will regularly receive economically free exposure in our culture is that of the president. The category of noncommodified relations, if observed at the level of the state over time, has a population of one.

The practice of giving a president free access to the public through private media firms does not predate the rise of commercial radio. A president could always be seen to represent or somehow embody a sense of national unity in people's thoughts, but before we became a technically and economically centralized society, such thoughts could be entertained at a leisurely pace. For large parts of the country, the president was weeks away by stage or rail; equally distant in space and time was the influence of Washington or New York. Just who the president was could be cultivated by local media—as an idea—and given whatever slant the local newspaper owner deemed appropriate. These local media firms did not see it as necessary or politic to grant the national president free space in their papers for signed presidential columns, even irregularily.

In this century, of course, the symbolic contours have changed. Not only is it technically feasible to reproduce the president's image in color and his voice in stereophonic quality in millions of homes simultaneously, but presidents expect this access to be availed them regularly. This opportunity arose during the great depression, when technical

capacity merged with a felt sense of urgency for leadership during the crisis to produce a number of new presidential practices, the most famous being F.D.R.'s fireside chats on network radio. Just why commercial radio agreed to allow free presidential broadcasts is beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it here to say that they did, and since that time free presidential access to the public has become part of the trappings of the office.

Presidents may now speak to millions directly. It is common to think that some who have were charismatic and others were not. Herbert Hoover was not F.D.R., for example. This contrast suggests that we may find different levels of presidential practice around that core communicative dynamic outlined for first-order relations. Some presidents found the means to monitor, understand, and feed back public sentiment, while others did not. The master of the charismatic process for the single noncommodified slot in our public sphere—our presidency—continues to be F.D.R.

F.D.R. took office during the middle of a banking crisis in 1933. His first fireside chat was sufficient to give confidence to a public that had been withdrawing its savings from banks at a rate that would completely destroy the U.S. banking system. After this speech and the implementation of its reorganization measures, the banks were reopened and the public stopped its withdrawals. Interestingly, a number of banks that emerged after the holiday were thought to be unsound by the technical standards of the time, but their survival was directly insured by the public's emerging faith in F.D.R. He asked them to have faith, and they did.

F.D.R. was not the embodiment of hope for all the people all the time during his administration, but instances such as the banking crisis were of sufficient import to call for something more than broad acceptance in the charisma of presidential office. They called for palpable and broad faith in the person occupying the office, something which F.D.R. was able to provide. But how was he able to do so?

F.D.R. did not innovate much in the private spheres through which presidents communicate with and are influenced by the powerful. He saw them directly in his office,

or felt their influence indirectly through their pressure on his executive staff, on Congress, and on the press. These private flows of interaction have always existed around the presidency.

A practice that seems to have taken strong hold during F.D.R.'s administration was to regularly consult members of the middle class who populate what I have called the first-order sphere. He consulted academics on the contours of the problems confronting the nation during the economic crisis, and even hired many of them to erect and staff the new state organizations that were designed to shore up or replace activities no longer being handled by the private economy. But, how did F.D.R. know how to handle the inevitable policy contradictions among his first-order people, or the conflicts between them and the ruling class?

Before F.D.R. took office, an average of 400 letters arrived at the White House each day. That number increased to 4,000 after 1932.[18] F.D.R. recognized the value of those letters; he encouraged people to write him. Eleanor did so, too, and directly. In a popular magazine article she asked women to write her not only of their fears but of what gave them hope for the future.[19] Roosevelt even read the ethnographies of ex-journalist Lorena Hickok, who was hired by W.P.A. administrator Harry Hopkins to criss-cross the country in her car and report what she saw.[20] An Office of Government Reports was created to rationalize information giving; it was also intended to rationalize information-*receiving* at all levels of the executive. In this way F.D.R. not only established lines of contact with the unseen majority, he also had the members of the bureaucracy doing the

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[18]Smith, Ira (1949) *Dear Mr. President.* New York: Julian Messner, contains comparative data on presidential letters back to the turn of this century. See also Sussmann, Leila (1963) *Dear FDR: A Study of Political Letter-Writing.* New York: [—].

[19]From an account of an August, 1933 article by Eleanor Roosevelt in *Womens Home Companion*, discussed in Beasley, Maureen (1987) *Eleanor Roosevelt and the Press.* Urbana, Illinois: The University of Illinois Press.

[20]Hickok, Lorena (1981) *One Third of a Nation.* Richard Lowitt and Maureen Beasley, eds. Urbana, Illinois: The University of Illinois Press.

same. It was his name, after all, that was on the line when a member of his government spoke publicly.

F.D.R. developed and used the resources of his office to create a communication system that is perhaps, in one respect, unmatched in our history. Given the means to broadcast his voice to the millions, he and his first secretary Louis Howe devised a managed to piece together the means to *hear* them. As in first-order relations, this is the stuff from which charismatic vision is made. It could be used directly to feed back hopes during fireside chats. It could be used to assess and change the efforts of his speechwriters. One of them, Charles Michelson, had noted that F.D.R. could read a speech draft and then come up with just the right way to phrase an idea.[21] At the moment F.D.R. did this I am sure that it appeared to Michelson to be the result of an intellectual gift. Howe and Roosevelt may have had a clearer idea of what the real gift was.[22]

These rich feedback processes could also give F.D.R. a sense of distance with which to apprehend the inevitable impasses that would arise between his braintrusters or between them and agents of power. He could then make decision on grounds not quite visible to the combatants in his office. In the same vein, his confident manner at press conferences is as famous as it was puzzling to participants. In light of the lengths to which F.D.R. encouraged the influx of letters, he may well have known more about the vision and circumstances of newspaper readers than did the members of the press corps themselves.

F.D.R.'s persona is still shrouded in a kind of mystery; we have detailed studies of his speech rate during radio addresses—quixotic attempts to find the magic keys to his persuasive power in his texts. Had he not been caught up in his own monster, perhaps Father Coughlin would have been the one to comprehend F.D.R.'s vision and

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[21](1944) *The Ghost Talks*. New York: G. Putnam's and Sons, p. 13.

[22]Stiles, Lila (1954) *The Man Behind Roosevelt*. Cleveland: The World Publishing Company. Rollins, Alfred R. *Roosevelt and Howe*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

personal grace. "I think I have my finger on the pulse of the nation," Father Coughlin once remarked, "I get 80,000 letters a week."[23]

Letters and telegrams are not a sufficient source for the construction of a charismatic dynamic in this unique relation, only a very necessary one. The effort must be undertaken within a broader task of ensuring continued class coexistence. But this is not accomplished by conjuring a rhetoric of empty generalizations acceptable to all. He says different things to different classes—*where* and *when* he chooses to find them—, if possible in their language and tone. With letters a president can bring survey data on attitudes to life and establish a relationship with people whose subjectivity is available in perhaps no other way. This may amount to an example of the disdained political practice of speaking out of so many sides of one's mouth, but is there any single voice that can speak with compelling unity in a nation such as ours? The journalist? Bob Hope?

The conditions of the depression gave F.D.R. an unusual space in which to operate. He could elicit broad support from below and, as long as he cultivated a voice for them, was oblivious to the brute machinations of the Liberty League or the more subtle attacks of hired editorial writers. (To be fair, F.D.R. planted his editorials, too.)

Since the Great Depression, there has been no such comparable space for a charismatic process fueled from below to develop in a president's person. We have, however, experienced a number of arguably radical changes within our broad institutional order since then, and they seemed to have received their primary motivation from above. In the latest phase of change we have seen the replacement of union jobs with jobs paying half their wages or less, a retrenchment of government services outside the military—felt directly by the academy—, further destruction of our cities, and the rise of feminine poverty and an underclass. All of this has taken place under the stewardship of a popular, even charismatic president.

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[23]Quoted in Bennett, David (1969) *Demagogues and the Depression.* New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers Univeristy Press.

Not to disparage Ronald Reagan's personal abilities, but the situation he faced was much different from that confronting F.D.R. Facing him was not a full depression but what was probably the vestiges of a capital strike against Jimmy Carter. Reagan had to undertake a series of social innovations that would improve not daily life but the business climate. To achieve legitimacy for this his party had to add perhaps fifteen percent to its natural voting constituency. Reagan took to the air and somehow captured a portion of what were formerly blue-collar Democrats, and he achieved a status among them reminiscent of F.D.R.'s attraction to his broader New Deal constituency.

But this is not an instance of history repeating itself. Much of what was done during the New Deal was directly attributable to F.D.R. and Louis Howe. The status achieved by Reagan may more likely turn out to be the result of planners and strategists in the Republican party in what was probably a very bureaucratic process. Our historical perspective on the Reagan administration is now under construction. I speculate that few insights into Reagan's charisma will be found by inspections of his personality. Though I am not privy to Republicn Party strategy, I suspect that historians will find it fruitful to see if there were not an ongoing effort by party planners to capture—on videotape, in focus groups—the passions and agenda and language of that portion of the population they needed to reach for the 1980 and 1984 elections. James Baker's first spin-doctoring comment after the second Dukakis-Bush debate in 1988 paid homage to Republican-sponsored focus groups.

History may see the Reagan administration as a prototypical example of manufactured charisma, a concept that has been around in the sociological literature for some time. Liberal and radical historians may treat this concept and its historical examples with disgust. Liberals evidently prefer to promote images of competence. This strategy, of course, has its natural consistency But those who believe in competence must somehow begin to see what it is coming to stand for in the eyes of second-order people—a readiness to condemn them for their flag-waving passions, by a people who speak to them

only when 'educating.' Liberals may do well to look at their own feedback processes, to listen to those whom they would otherwise find many reasons to despise, if they wish to break the hegemony of political show business that now literally envelops them.

Conclusion

It will take a much longer study to evaluate the the illuminating potential and the limitations of the theory of commodity relations and the picture it gives of our public sphere. I have said nothing here, for example, about how professional journalists learn the publicly acceptable forms in which to express their work, or about the consequences for the institution if they indeed do not. Nor have I reviewed early attempts by radio educators to broadcast classes for money, or why they failed. Missing, too, is a discussion of the general dynamics of the degradation ritual—a counter-charismatic process—within commodity relations, or the outstanding example of this process across commodity realms in the competition between Father Coughlin and F.D.R. I have instead opted to *begin* discussion of some very human phenomena with an economic category, tracing the logic of the commodity form through its influence on modern charismatic processes. It has been my intellectual concern for some time to develop a broad view of our public sphere without having to move to abstract functional or systems-theoretic imagery. Such a view is only beginning to come together, but I believe it is possible to obtain.

Of course, my motivation is more than theoretical. I admit to feeling a sense of urgency as I witness and compare what is discussed and displayed in our public sphere with the immense activities undertaken by our corporate and state institutions. We are, in my view, a culture of misplaced passions, focused microscopically on image and personality, seeking even reasoned understanding of the world around us in psychology. I have tried to seek out other grounds on which to reopen the question of a democratic press. Diversity of symbols we have plenty—our discourse varys like our fingerprints, in

similarly small gradations. We may one day wish the polity at large to have more options, which means some of the issues we debate in our first-order sphere may require the same passionate and creative efforts—and reach—given to the Reebok ads in our second-order sphere. We will not find out how to foster involvement in our common problems through professional standards and symbols alone. We will need to study the processes by which ideas—the substance of reason—are given life in the eyes of our democratic masses.

Job number 925913 University of Michigan Terminal System (Model UN239) 00:13:27 EDT Mon Jul 17/89

User: GARM Project: GAAE Name: Brian Nienhaus

Obtained at 00:13:27 Mon Jul 17/89
Released at 00:13:59 Mon Jul 17/89

Lines printed 2685
Pages printed 33
Images printed 34
Sheets printed 18

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